

## Assessing Child Welfare Agency Practices and Attitudes that Affect Father Engagement

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### **Abstract:**

The importance of fathers' involvement in their children's lives is irrefutable. Supportive, warm, and positive involvement of fathers leads to children being well-adjusted. Indeed, involved fathers positively influence their children's cognitive ability, social behavior, psychological well-being, and educational achievement. For children in foster care, when fathers are involved they have significantly shorter stays in foster care than those whose fathers are not involved. For parents to demonstrate fitness to parent they must show the successful completion of goals specified in a case plan that promotes safety and permanence of their child. This cross-sectional study investigated how fathers' perception of social workers' attitude and practice skills was associated with fathers' understanding and confidence with regard to completing the case plan goals. A purposive sample of 56 child welfare-involved fathers completed the Child Welfare Father Involvement Questionnaire. The findings indicated that the more positive fathers perceived social workers' attitude and skills, the greater their understanding about the case plan goals and greater confidence to complete case plan goals. The results were statistically significant. These results have implications for child welfare training to build the social worker-client relationship in a compassionate manner while maintaining a rigorous assessment and monitoring of fathers' parenting capabilities.

**Keywords:** Father engagement | father involvement | assessment | child welfare | agency barriers

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

The importance of fathers' involvement in their children's lives is irrefutable. Supportive, warm, and positive involvement of fathers leads to children being well-adjusted; research shows that involved fathers positively influence their children's cognitive ability, social behavior, psychological well-being, and educational achievement (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-Lemonda, 2007; Lamb, 2010). Unfortunately, of the more than 415,000 children in foster care in

the U.S., nearly 61,000 were waiting to be adopted because parental rights were terminated on both their parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families [DHHS, AFS, 2015]). The most common case plan goals were either to reunite the child with his or her parent(s) or principal caretaker(s) (55%) or place the child for adoption (25%) (DHHS, AFS, 2015).

For fathers who want to retain custody and access to their children the challenge to securing this connection can be especially daunting. Child welfare-involved fathers are known to experience personal problems, limited parenting skills (McLanahan & Beck, 2010; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005; Waller & Swisher, 2006), and economic challenges, which affect their involvement with their children and the child welfare agency. Often, they are assumed to be less capable or interested in being involved in parenting and face other obstacles including limited access, strained relationships with the mother of the child, and have financial and other obligations that reduce the time they are available to be with their child.

The window of opportunity to show a father's commitment to being a custodial parent is often very limited. For parents to demonstrate fitness to parent they must show the successful completion of goals specified in a case plan that promotes safety and permanence of their child (Adoption and Safe Families Act [ASFA], 1997; NCDHHS, 2015). For fathers of children in the child welfare system, involvement in case planning is critical because it may be the only opportunity a father will have to demonstrate he is fit to remain in his child's life. If a father is not involved in the case planning process or does not comply with case plan goals to rectify child abuse and neglect concerns, he risks losing his parental rights (NCDHHS, 2015).

### Importance of Father Involvement

The importance of father involvement in their children's lives is unquestionable. Supportive, warm, and positive involvement of fathers leads to children being well-adjusted (ASFA, 1997; Lamb, 2010). Research has shown that involved fathers influence their children's cognitive ability, social behavior (Cabrera et al., 2007), psychological well-being, and educational achievement (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). In addition, research indicates that children whose fathers were involved in their case or lives had significantly shorter stays in foster care than those whose fathers were not involved (Coakley, 2008; Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008). In a qualitative study conducted by Campbell, Howard, Rayford, and Gordon (2015), 48 fathers from child protection services (i.e., investigation cases) and foster care cases were randomly selected to participate in semi-structured discussions about their unique experiences and needs regarding the child welfare agency (i.e., listening forum/focus group). The researchers found that children involved with the child welfare system were more likely to be reunited with their families when multiple parents (e.g., mother and father) were involved in the case. Engaging both parents also led to fewer placements and reduced trauma among the children due to lower rates of separation from the family (Campbell et al., 2015).

### Child Welfare System Barriers to Father Reunification with Their Children

Limitations on parental access and other obstacles to involvement with their children often place fathers in the precarious position of relying on child welfare agency workers to work with them toward reunification due to feeling the workers do not treat them fairly, respect them as men, or value them as fathers (Coakley, 2013; Brodie, Paddock, Gilliam, & Chavez, 2014; Campbell et al., 2015). Research has shown how agency practices and policies can create challenges for

fathers, hindering their ability to take part in the case planning process and agency decision-making to determine their children's placement outcomes (Behnke, Taylor, & Parra-Cardonna, 2008; Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Earner, 2007; Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006; Malm et al., 2008).

### Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of Father's Ability to Responsible Parenting

In previous research, child welfare workers reported the major barriers to father engagement were: fathers' discomfort and distrust working with the agency; fathers not attending agency meetings; fathers not returning the child welfare workers' calls and; fathers not having a valid address or working telephone to be contacted (Coakley, Kelley, & Bartlett, 2014). Other studies have shown that social workers were not adequately prepared to handle fathers' unique needs, which differed in some areas from the needs of those typically served (i.e., mothers) (Coakley, Kelley, & Bartlett, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2005). In a qualitative study of 30 fathers, several fathers reported that social workers' attitudes were poor and their skills were unsupportive, qualities they felt affected their motivation or desire to work with the child welfare agency in order to preserve their family unit (Coakley, 2013). Moreover, a qualitative study with child welfare workers, revealed that they were less likely to engage fathers when they had negative professional or personal interactions (usually regarding case plan compliance challenges) with the fathers in the past (Campbell et al., 2015). Research has shown that fathers who did not feel welcome or valued by the child welfare agency were not likely to work towards permanency (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Some fathers attributed working with social workers who were compassionate, respectful, and competent to their ability to successfully complete the case plan goals (Coakley, 2013).

### Family Systems and Parenting Efficacy Theory

Family systems theory best explains how child welfare-involved fathers and their family deal with emotional challenges and conflicts between each other and within their environment when fathers are introduced into the family for the first time or when they are reunited with their family after being separated for some time due to the child welfare agency intervening (Bowen, 1978). Parenting efficacy theory can be applied to understand the significant role that child welfare agency social workers play in fathers' ability to gain confidence to overcome parenting and other obstacles so that they may remain in their children's lives once they exit the child welfare system. This theory—derived from social cognitive theory—supports the contention that is important for parents (fathers) to have confidence in their ability to act successfully in the parenting role (Dumka, Stoerzinger, Jackson, & Roosa, 1996). A key component of parenting efficacy is that a parent needs to become motivated to accept that effective parenting is achieved through setting goals and consistently engaging in activities to achieve those goals (Nock & Kazdin, 2005). In the context of the proposed application of parenting efficacy theory, fathers must possess the perception that they can achieve the mandated case plan goals that will keep their family intact (Bandura, 1977; Dumka et al., 1996). In this article, we emphasize the importance of social workers' positive persuasion in order to motivate fathers to move from acknowledging their goals to putting them into action.

The purpose of our study was to understand how social workers' attitude and practice skills can impact fathers' involvement with the child welfare agency. It is our contention that social workers can use positive persuasion in order to motivate fathers to move from acknowledging their goals to putting them into action. Thus, we hypothesized that social workers' attitude will be

positively related to fathers' understanding of case plan and confidence to complete the case plan. We also hypothesized that social workers' practice skills will be positively related to fathers' understanding of the case plan and their confidence to complete the case plan.

## **Method**

### **Study Design and Sample**

This was a cross-sectional survey study. The sample consisted of 56 fathers and father figures whose families were involved in preventive, protective, foster care, or economic services at a local child welfare agency; hence, child welfare-involved. The respondents consisted of 53 biological fathers, 2 stepfathers, and 1 uncle. Of the 56 fathers in the sample, 60.7% were African-American, 28.6% were Caucasian, 3.6% were multiethnic, 1.8% was Hispanic/Latino, and 5.4% identified as "other." The median age for fathers was between 31 and 40 years. Fathers reported being either single (46.4%), married (30.4%), or divorced/separated (21.4%). Their education levels varied. For instance, 25% had less than a high school diploma, 35.7% had a high school diploma or GED, and 32.1% had some college. The majority of the fathers either reported their religion as Christian or indicated having a specific Christian religion (78.5%). At the time of child welfare agency (Department of Social Services) involvement (e.g., investigation, removal), most of the children of the participating fathers were living with at least one biological parent (78.5%). Approximately, 42% of fathers reported that none of their children lived with them. A little over a fifth (21.5%) of the fathers reported not having custody of any of their children. Over a fourth (27.9%) of the fathers reported a positive reunification experience with their children who were placed in foster care or somewhere else by the Department of Social Services (DSS). Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

### **Recruitment**

Participant fathers for the study were recruited by a local DSS agency. Recruitment involved the employment of several strategies. Initially, agency administrators and supervisors distributed copies of the study flyer, which included the project director's contact information, to social workers from all DSS children's units and economic services. The social workers were also instructed to either share the flyer information with fathers from their enrolled cases by telephone or present the flyers during routine in-person contact with them. A DSS administrator also shared the flyer with a local fathers' support group that often served child welfare-involved fathers.

Potential participants who were interested or wanted additional information about the study either called or e-mailed the study's program office or permitted their social workers to forward their contact information to the program director, who compiled a single contact list. All inquiries resulted in a telephone conversation between the researchers and the prospective participants to screen them for the study and read an informed consent form that explained the study procedures and risks.

Eligible fathers were invited to participate in the study. The study did not exclude participants because of their race, ethnicity, or any other demographics, though only those fathers (fathers or father figures of legal standing) who verified that they were 18 years and older were recruited. In addition, some fathers declined to participate in the study once contacted, and others were unable to be contacted by the research team. A total of 56 fathers completed the study survey instrument.

**Table 1.** Fathers' characteristics.

<b>Variable (n = 56)</b>	<b>%</b>
Legal Status	
Biological father	94.6
Stepfather	3.6
Uncle 1.8	
Race/Ethnicity	
African–American	60.7
Caucasian	28.6
Hispanic/Latino	1.8
Multiethnic	3.6
Other	5.4
Age	
21–30	30.4
31–40	32.1
41–50	25.0
51–60	10.7
61 years and above	1.8
Education	
Less than high school	25.0
High school degree/GED	35.7
Some college, but did not finish	32.1
Associate degree/2 year college degree	3.6
Bachelors degree/4 year college degree	1.8
Advanced college degree	1.8
Employment	
Full-time	37.5
Part-time	8.9
Unemployed	37.5
Retired or disabled (not working)	8.9
Other	7.1
Annual Income	
0–\$9,999	44.6
\$10,000–\$19,000	23.2
\$20,000–\$29,000	10.7
\$30,000–\$39,000	12.5
\$40,000–\$49,000	3.6
\$50,000–\$59,000	1.8
\$70,000–\$79,000	3.6
Marital Status	
Single	30.4
Married/Partnered	46.4
Divorced/Separated	21.4
Other	1.8
Living Arrangements when child initially became involved with DSS.	
Father rented home/room	60.7
Father lived with a relative 16.1	

Variable ( <i>n</i> = 56)	%
Father owned home 14.3	
Religion	
Christian	50.0
Baptist	19.6
Episcopalian	1.8
Catholic	7.1
Muslim	5.4
None	16.1
Knows rights as a father as related to child being in foster care.	
No	25.9
Yes	51.9
N.A.	22.2

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#### Informed Consent

Prior to their participation, prospective participants were read the project's informed consent form via telephone at least a week before they participated in the study. Once at the data collection site the researchers discussed the confidentiality of the interviews and reiterated that only aggregate data would be reported, and that participants' identifiable or personal information would not be shared with anyone, including their child welfare agency or social workers. The fathers also were informed of the researchers' legal obligation to report suspected child abuse or threats to harm others.

#### Data Collection

Data collection occurred in several locations for the participants' convenience: a private conference room at a large university in the Southeastern region of the U.S., in the participants' home, or a private meeting space in the community (e.g., library meeting room). Data were collected using face-to-face individual interviews by an African–American female (project director), an African–American male (research assistant), and/or a Latina (research assistant). The project director conducted two interviews paired with each of the research assistants in order to assure consistency in interviewing methods. For one Hispanic male participant who preferred to communicate in Spanish, the study was conducted in Spanish by the Latina research assistant.

All fathers completed a Background Information Survey and the Fathers' Child Welfare Involvement Questionnaire on one of their children of their choosing, who was involved with the child welfare system. Participants had the opportunity to either complete the survey and questionnaire on their own or have an interviewer assist them by reading the questions and response items aloud. This method was offered to maintain the validity of results since some participants' education level might affect their reading capacity; thus, their ability to respond to the questions. On average, data collection took 30 minutes to complete for each participant. Participants received a \$75 Walmart gift card immediately after they completed the study. The Institutional Review Board of the authors' university approved all study procedures for human participants.

## Measures

A modified version of the *Fathers' Child Welfare Involvement Questionnaire (FCWIQ)* (Author) was used to test our hypotheses. The FCWIQ (developed by the first author) includes 127 items in five subsections (Part A-Part E). The FCWIQ is a comprehensive measure of the nature and extent of fathers' involvement with their children, and fathers' impression about the child welfare agency supports and barriers (developed by the first author). The responses are rated on a 5-point scale, from not applicable = 0, strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly agree = 4. The questionnaire's completion time is approximately 30 minutes. This measure was developed using information from extensive literature reviews, African American parent training manuals, the ASFA (2015), as well as from individual interviews with child welfare-involved fathers and interviews with child welfare experts from the southeast region of the United States. The FICWQ Part E: *Social worker/child welfare agency involvement* was used to test our study's hypotheses. This subscale has 28 items. A sample item includes: "*The social worker keeps me informed/contacts me regularly*" ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

*Dependent variables.* The first dependent variable for this study was fathers' *understanding of the case plan*. This variable was measured using a single item, *understanding of the case plan*, from Section E of the FICWQ. The second dependent variable was fathers' *confidence in their ability to achieve the case plan goals* from Section E of the FICWQ.

High scores (score = 4) represent high level of understanding of the case plan goals. Medium scores (score = 3) represent medium level of understanding. Fathers in this range may still need to be encouraged and empowered to stay involved. However, less frequent contact may be needed by the social worker. Scores in the lower boundary interquartile range (score = 1 or 2) indicate a low level of understanding of the case plan goals. Low understanding suggests disengagement or other barriers to involvement. Further, low scores indicate that a high frequency of intensive support and verbal encouragement is needed to help fathers understand what actions are required of them to successfully complete the case plan goals.

Similarly, high scores (score = 4) for the variable, *confidence in their ability to achieve the case plan goals*, represent high level of confidence in their ability to complete the case plan goals. Medium scores (score = 3) represent medium level of confidence and so on. Fathers in the medium to high range likely need only moderate to minimal encouragement from social workers to stay involved. Low scores (score = 1 or 2) signify a low level of confidence in a father's ability to complete the case plan goals. Therefore, intensive support and verbal encouragement is also warranted to persuade fathers (i.e., influence fathers' belief) that they are capable of achieving the case plan goals.

*Independent variables.* Based on previous studies that serve as the foundation of the body of literature on child welfare-involved fathers' involvement, the FICWQ Part E was used to examine the study's two main independent variables: (a) *fathers' perceptions of social workers' attitude* and (b) *fathers' perception of social workers' practice skills*. These two variables were not observed directly, instead they were derived using items from the existing FICWQ Part E (Author), which were combined to form composite variables. Items on perceived *social workers' attitude* included: the social worker respects me; feels as though I have something important or useful to add to discussions and; is willing to listen to me when I have concerns. Items on perceived *social worker practice skills* included: the social worker keeps me informed, contacts me regularly, meets with me regularly, and includes me in important meetings or decisions.

### Statistical Analyses

SPSS 21.0 was used to analyze the data in this study. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the sociodemographic responses and FICWQ items. In addition, we conducted bivariate analyses using Spearman's rho to measure the magnitude and direction of the relationship between pairs of ordinal level variables. Significance was determined based on two-tailed statistical tests; results in either direction were considered possible outcomes. Alpha was set at .05.

To handle missing data, we conducted the Missing Value Analysis in SPSS 21.0 for independent and dependent variables. Originally there were 9 cases (16.1%) for each of the dependent variables with incomplete data, which posed to hinder our analyses. We selected the Expectation–Maximization (EM) method to estimate the means, covariance matrix, and correlation of quantitative variables that had missing values. This procedure assumed that the data were missing completely at random, thus Little's MCAR test was used, indicating that the data were in fact missing in a completely random manner ( $\chi^2 = .852$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = .974$ ). An analysis of the patterns of the missing data was performed. We set the minimum missing for each variable to be detected at 0.01%. The multiple imputation procedure was used to generate possible values for values that were missing, yielding a complete dataset with pooled output that reflects estimated results from the original dataset if there were no missing data (Little & Rubin, 2002).

## Results

### Independent Variables

To test for independence of fathers' perception of social workers' attitudes and their skills the distributions of the fathers' perception ratings were first examined. Results showed there were moderately high scores for the variable, *social workers' attitude* ( $N = 56$ , *Median* = 3, *Range* 1–4). The frequency distribution was negatively skewed (skewness =  $-.74$  [ $\sigma = .36$ ]) and negatively kurtotic ( $-.14$  [ $\sigma = .70$ ]). There also were moderately high scores for the variable, *social workers' practice skills* ( $N = 56$ , *Median* = 2.1, *Range* 1–4). The frequency distribution was negatively skewed (skewness =  $-.16$  [ $\sigma = .37$ ]) and positively kurtotic ( $-.53$  [ $\sigma = .71$ ]). Higher scores indicate more effective social worker practice skills. A bivariate correlation between social workers' attitude and social workers' practice skills indicated a statistically significant positive association ( $N = 56$ ,  $\rho = .61$ , 95% CI [.41, .81],  $p = .000$ ). Additionally, there was no multicollinearity between the independent variables (Social Worker Attitude, Tolerance = .41, VIF = 2.42; Social Worker Practice Skills, Tolerance = .41, VIF = 2.42).



**Table 2.** Correlations between Fathers' Perceptions of Social Workers' Attitudes and Father outcomes.

	Respects me	Feels as though I have something important or useful to add to discussions	Is willing to listen to me when I have concerns
	$\rho$	$\rho$	$\rho$
	<i>CI</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>CI</i>
Dependent Variable	N	N	N
I understand the case plan or what is expected of me to keep my child with family	.53	.42	.57**
	.27, .79	.13, .70	.31, .84
	45	44	42
The case plan is reasonable and I feel I can meet the goals	.46**	.56**	.58**
	.18, .73	.30, .81	.34, .87
	45	44	42

\*\* Correlation is significant at .001 (two-tailed).

**Table 3.** Correlations between Fathers' perceptions of Social Workers' Practice Skills and Father outcomes.

	Keeps me informed	Contacts me regularly	Meets/met with me regularly	Includes me in important meetings or decisions
	$\rho$	$\rho$	$\rho$	$\rho$
	<i>CI</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>CI</i>
Variable	N	N	N	N
I understand the case plan or what is expected of me to keep my child with family	.41*	.32*	.40*	.36*
	.12, .72	.01, .63	.10, .72	.07, .66
	42	41	40	44
The case plan is reasonable and I feel I can meet the goals	.31*	.22	.36*	.29
	.00, .63	-.10, .53	.06, .66	-.01, .59
	42	41	40	44

\* Correlation is significant at  $p \leq .05$  (2-tailed). Lower bound and upper bound confidence intervals at 95%.

Correlations between *social workers' attitudes* and *fathers' confidence in completing the case plan* and *fathers' understanding of the case plan* are presented in Table 2. The results show that in general fathers' reports of social worker attitudes were moderately correlated with their confidence in and understanding of their child's case plan. Fathers' perceptions that social workers were willing to listen to their concerns showed the strongest correlation (albeit by a modest amount) with the fathers' case plan confidence and understanding. Correlations between fathers' perceptions of *social worker skills* and their *confidence in completing the case plan* and *understanding of the case plan* are shown in Table 3. These correlations show a modest relationship between perceptions of *social workers' practice skills* and *fathers' confidence in completing the case plan* and *fathers' understanding of the case plan*. The correlations also indicate that perceptions of *social workers' practice skills* and *fathers' understanding of the case plan* were somewhat stronger than their *confidence in completing the plans*. Overall, the patterns of correlations indicate that perceptions of *social worker attitudes* were more strongly related to

fathers' perceptions of their *confidence in understanding of their children's case plans* and their *understanding of the case plans* than *social worker skill levels*.

### Dependent Variables

The two main dependent variables examined were fathers' *understanding of the case plan* and fathers' *confidence in their ability to complete case plan goal*. We conducted univariate analysis to obtain descriptive statistics for the variables studied. The scores from the variable, fathers' *understanding the case plan goals* represent moderate understanding ( $N = 56$ ,  $Median = 3$ ,  $Range 1-4$ ). The frequency distribution was negatively skewed ( $-1.28 [\sigma = .34]$ ) and positively kurtotic ( $2.66 [\sigma = .67]$ ). The variable, fathers' *confidence in completing the case plan goals* had moderately low scores ( $N = 56$ ,  $Median = 2.1$ ,  $Range 1-4$ ). The frequency distribution was positively skewed (skewness =  $.11 [\sigma = .37]$ ) and negatively kurtotic ( $-.398 [\sigma = .73]$ ). Additionally, a bivariate correlation indicated that fathers' *understanding of the case plan* was significantly positively associated to their *confidence in completing the case plan goals* ( $N = 56$ ,  $\rho = .72$ , 95% CI  $[.54, 1.02]$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

### Discussion

The study provided a test of parenting social efficacy theory relating fathers' confidence in participating and their understanding of case planning to their perceptions of social workers' attitudes and practice skills. The results showed accord with both stated hypotheses that (1) fathers' understanding of case plans was positively related to that social workers' attitude and (2) fathers' confidence to complete the case plans was positively related to that social workers' attitudes. The findings suggest that social workers' attitude had a greater effect on fathers' case plan success than social workers' practice skills. This was not surprising since attitudes may be easier to judge (perceived) than skills (less observable, less understanding of effective skills).

Moreover, these findings suggest that while social workers' proficiency in practice skills mainly translates to competence in relaying accurate information to clients that may not be sufficient when clients are faced with perceived insurmountable challenges. In other words, simply informing fathers of what is required in order to complete the case plan goals does not necessarily mean that the information is conveyed with the necessary compassion. Therefore, fathers might not interpret social workers' sole use of their skills (e.g., without compassion) as true "engagement." Further, even when fathers increase their understanding of the required information imparted by the social workers, they might not feel worthy as a contributor to the case plan goals or hopeful that they can make a positive difference in their children's lives, therefore they may not even try to make an effect (Coakley, 2013). However, if he feels that he does not possess the skills or ability to care for the child, he might be less hopeful that he can make a difference in his child's life.

Our present study expands the father involvement knowledge base with the quantitative data concerning key concepts on social workers' attitude and skills needed to inform child welfare-involved fathers about the case planning process and empower them to complete the case plan goals. Our findings regarding fathers' barriers to case related meetings and activities are consistent with previous studies, which concluded that fathers felt social workers' negative attitudes affected their involvement adversely and; social workers' compassionate and respectful attitudes promoted their involvement (Coakley, Kelley, & Bartlett, 2014; Campbell et al., 2015). Child welfare agencies' climate and practices convey their openness to working with fathers. If

fathers do not feel comfortable, respected, or valued in their dealings with the child welfare system, then they may choose not to work with social workers toward permanence (O'Donnell et al., 2005).

Social workers often step into the role of “persuader” (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 2002), an instrumental role in developing another's self-beliefs. They have the power—through nonverbal and verbal communication and actions—to encourage and empower an individual, increasing their self-efficacy. On the other hand, the actions of negative persuaders can result in weakening or destroying an individual's self-efficacy. Learning how to engage child welfare-involved fathers entails demonstrating both effective practices and a positive attitude during service delivery. This has implications for training social workers and teaching students to enable them to build the social worker–client relationship in a compassionate manner while assessing and monitoring fathers' parenting capabilities (Coakley, 2013; Campbell et al., 2015). According to Malm et al. (2006), caseworkers who received father engagement training were significantly more likely to share the case plans with fathers, consider fathers as part of the reunification plan, and work closely with fathers to reunite them with their children. Our findings suggest that even when a father perceives his chance to gain access to his child to be bleak, he can be hopeful that he can achieve case plan goals and have a positive, permanent role in his child's life.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Our study design and small purposive sample limit our ability to generalize the survey findings and further preclude us from drawing conclusions regarding causal effects. First, we are limited by the nonprobability, cross-sectional design, in that we cannot definitively state that the independent variables actually influenced fathers' successfully completing the case plan goals; only that they comprehended the goals and felt confident that they could complete them. Even so, we feel that the results regarding our measured outcomes are an important step, given the theoretical basis for parental self-efficacy and its association with actual parenting capabilities (Bandura, 1977; Dumka et al., 1996).

Our use of a purposive sampling method produced invaluable information from the population of child welfare-involved fathers served in our community, which has facilitated our understanding about the father–agency relationships. Here-to-fore, this crucial knowledge was unknown in the emerging area of research about this population. We acknowledge however, that the characteristics (thus findings) that pertain to this small, nonprobability sample might not represent the views of other child welfare-involved fathers from the larger population outside of the southeastern community or those with different levels of agency trust. The fathers who participated might be those who likely agreed to do the survey because they were proud to share their positive experiences. On the other hand, an uncertainty about how the study would affect their cases could have caused some prospective participants to decline to participate or to positively rate their level of confidence or understanding regarding completing the case plan goals. Many child welfare-involved fathers are keenly aware that their behavior and actions could potentially affect their case; thus, a plausible reason to avoid a research study or succumb to social desirability related to parenting capabilities and case plan compliance.

Moreover, fathers' desire to avoid risks to confidentiality also could have potentially affected the validity of the data. During recruitment and prior to data collection we explained the nature of confidentiality, which included our duty to report any disclosures regarding harming others, including a child. We point this out because a misinterpretation about our obligation to report or

uncertainty about confidentiality could have made some fathers leery about reporting demographic information (e.g., living arrangement) or their barriers, which could potentially be viewed as obstacles in a reunification case plan goal. A fear that somehow their responses would not be totally confidential could have influenced some fathers to intentionally provide inaccurate positive responses.

Because child welfare-involved fathers may have a history of distrust with the agency, it is important for researchers and practitioners who will work with these men to be sensitive to their reservations to take part in study or agency activities. They should plan sufficient time where they can explain to fathers the importance and process of what they are being asked to do, the limitations of confidentiality, the ramifications for not participating (pertains to agency only), and allow them an opportunity to ask questions.

We also recognize that obtaining a self-report from fathers about their level of engagement and barriers to engagement is a major strength in this study. Without hearing directly from fathers, researchers can only speculate on fathers' opinions regarding the issues that contribute to their involvement or lack thereof; however, such speculation will not produce effective practices to engage them. Many studies about fathers' involvement only include either the social workers' or the child's mothers' views about fathers. Typically, these studies report fathers' deficits in their level of support or involvement with their children, or they focus on fathers' transgressions or noncompliance in the case planning process. For instance, mothers underrated fathers' level of involvement, and this was especially true in low-income families (Coley & Morris, 2002). Additionally, the literature regarding child welfare-involved fathers shows that when invited to be a part of the case planning process, some fathers will decline to participate or will demonstrate a number of negative behaviors while participating in the process (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Future research is needed to supply the body of father involvement literature with ample studies in which fathers provide their own perspective on their behavior, as well as their assessment of their social workers and their children's mothers as it relates to inhibitors and facilitators to engage fathers.

Finally, the FICWQ Part-E used in this study was part of a larger scale developed by the first author in order to answer principle questions about father-child and father-agency involvement that could potentially impact the case planning process. A future study needs to be conducted with a larger sample to establish the scale's reliability and validity. In addition, further development of the FICWQ should involve a reduction of items. This would shorten the amount of time for respondents to complete the measure, making it more practical to use in child welfare agencies where time is of the essence for social workers to inform and encourage fathers' to successfully complete the case plan.

Future research should use predictive models with additional variables to explain more fully the dependent variable vs. a single item dependent variable. Additionally, we recommend the use of a tool that contains a full universe of items to explain social workers' attitudes and skills. Such adjustments could have an impact on the magnitude of the correlation, thus amount of variance in the dependent variable accounted for by the independent variable.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between fathers and child welfare agencies is important and affects the extent of fathers' involvement and ultimately children's well-being and permanence. Therefore, it is critical

for agencies to be aware of various barriers that they impose on fathers that inhibit them from parenting effectively and supporting their families. In addition, assessing case planning areas in which fathers need assistance would facilitate agencies in offering specialized services to fathers to enhance their experience working together with their social worker, as well as their view of the child welfare agency's intentions to involve fathers. It will also give social workers a more realistic view of the fathers' parenting areas that need to be strengthened. Services which are also informed by a comprehensive assessment that is specific to child welfare-involved fathers' perceptions and experiences (e.g., FICWQ), have the potential to enhance and restore fathers' role in society to successfully raise their children once they have exited the child welfare system.

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